



THE EVOLUTIONIST



Vol. I. September, 1909. No. 3

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Wm. H. Dixon



MAY WOOD SIMONS

Ground in the Mill

By MAY WOOD SIMONS

She sat every day at the same window. Every day she was making button holes. Hers was no ordinary face. It was long and lean with the hair black and straight and heavy drawn up high on the head.

For two years I had watched her every day as I came and went on the elevated train to my work. She sat at the second story window of a coat factory always making one motion of the arm; that needed in making the button holes on countless numbers of coats.

Sometimes she glanced up from her work. Our eyes would meet. Then we would nod to each other and each go on to her work. Sometimes she was working on great black coats. Sometimes on brown or blue. In the heat of the unendurable summer days her long lean arms with the sleeves drawn high up moved back and forth drawing and turning the thread in those armies of coats.

Sometimes as I passed I surprised her eating lunch. She ate sitting at the window with the eternal coat thrown over a nearby chair waiting for her.

The lunch she had brought tied in a bit of brown paper. It was dark rye bread. A cup of water stood



near on the window sill. Sometimes I dreamed of the coats she was working on. They seemed legions always ready for those interminable button holes. They appeared to crowd and throng about her in the stifling air of the factory.

So I grew to watch for her face at the window. I could not tell if she were young. She might have been but if she were a strained, anxious look had made her prematurely old, and at night she seemed tired, very tired.

Then one night she was not there. Another woman was sitting in her chair. Another day and still another, but she did not come back. Although no word had ever passed between us, only that silent nod, I went down from the elevated station on the evening of the fourth day and up into the factory to find her.

At the door of the sweat shop a man met me. He was dark and heavy with a great double chin. After a good deal of parleying he told me the address of the woman who had sat at the window.

It was as I had thought. She lived on the west side, the great west side of Chicago where factories and shops and hovels called homes and bakeries and loan shops are crowded together with the shacks of old clothes dealers and street venders.

It was late when I came to the west side. It was growing dark. To reach the address quickly I started down an alley. Whirr, whirr, rattle, whirr, whirr. No, it was not the rustle of leaves, for no green leaves rustle in the foul, dust-laden air over these alleys.

Dark, grey forms darted here and there nearly dodg-

ing over my feet. Bold, beady eyes looked at me in the half dark and as the rats scurried from one foul garbage box to another they rustled and scattered the piles of papers strewn in the alley.

One great grey form I took for a cat. But as it bounded under a discouraged looking lamp post at the entrance of the alley I saw it was a great beast of the rat kind.

Amelia did not come to the door when I rapped finally at the entrance of a basement room. A neighbor had helped me to find the dark little passage, lighting me with a candle and telling me the name of the woman at the window.

I pushed upon the door.

Four children, one nine, the youngest three, all came forward as the door opened.

An old woman, very old, with the bent form and weary face of one who had struggled with great hardships sat near the dingy oil lamp. On a cot in the corner lay Amelia.

The old mother tottered toward the door, the children clinging to her.

Amelia was sick, yes, very sick. For weeks she had been ailing. This the mother told. But she worked on, oh, yes, she must work on, for how would the children be fed. There were six mouths to be filled. So she worked on. Now she talks only of the coats. She is only making button holes. She lay half clothed on the bed, a faded colored dress covered her form. Her great mass of hair was loose. Sometimes she half rose on the

cot and her lean arms and long lean fingers turned an imaginary thread and drew it out. Amelia made button holes. Then, exhausted, she fell back on the shabby pillow. Her eyes, hot and burning, turned here and there.

She was such a good girl, the mother's voice went on. She married and the babies came and then August died, died of the white plague, for he was a worker in the sweat shop, too. Then Amelia worked at the factory.

The old mother cared for the children. Yes, Amelia had been a bright girl and she had come from Germany when almost a young woman. She had tried at one time to learn at school. She could read.

A doctor had been in. He came but once and said he could not come again for another day.

The weak voice of the sick woman was murmuring some German words.

A nearby doctor when brought in said the case was hopeless. It had been hopeless from the beginning. Only a few hours. So the mother, moaning and sobbing, went on with the tale of the struggles of Amelia to keep the six mouths fed.

A little wooden clock struck eleven. For an hour the sick woman had not moved.

The lean grey face was quiet. The end had come.

As I went out from the room of the button hole maker a slow rain was falling over the dusty west side and the rats scurried for covering under the nearby boxes and rotten sidewalks.